

What future for the policy sciences? A rejoinder to Muth, Pelletier, and Wallace

ROGER A. PIELKE JR.

*CIRES Center for Science and Technology Policy Research, University of Colorado, Boulder,
1333 Grandview Avenue, UCB 488, Boulder, CO 80309-0488, U.S.A.; E-mail: pielke@colorado.edu*

I am grateful to my colleagues Rod Muth, David Pelletier, and Rich Wallace for providing three thoughtful reactions to my essay. I am also thankful to Steve Brown for providing a public forum for this discussion. In some contexts, self-evaluation can meet with considerable resistance and a focus on the messenger and not the message. But the well-considered responses suggest that we in the policy sciences community should have some considerable optimism about the acceptability of self-reflection and debate in pursuit of shared goals. Without a willingness to engage one another and share ideas openly there would be little reason to expect the sustainability of any intellectual endeavor.

While there is much to discuss in the details of the three responses, I would note at the outset that none of the responses engaged the issue that I raised of the “simple arithmetic” of the policy sciences community – specifically, where are future generations of policy scientists to come from? Wallace notes that presently at least 14 faculty are teaching the policy sciences in graduate programs at US universities and interprets this condition as a data point in a broader positive trend of growth in academic policy scientists.

It is worth noting that the 14 faculty Wallace refers to represent the sum total of all second- and third-generation policy sciences scholars produced over the past 40 years currently teaching the policy sciences to future generations of teachers. Unless and until an alternative to university-based graduate education is found (and in the responses several are discussed), the future of the policy sciences tradition rests with these individuals, their academic programs, and the ability of their graduates to secure positions in which they can train succeeding generations of policy scientists.

Wallace does not discuss the current rate of production of third- and fourth-generation faculty of the policy sciences, which from the standpoint of sustainability is more important than the current total number of faculty, and he presents a conclusion as an article of faith: “I believe that the community is experiencing acceptable growth to sustain itself.” But here too the data suggest that there is reason for some concern. Consider that at the University of Colorado, one of the two leading policy sciences programs in the United States, during the course of about 25 years only one third-generation scholar has assumed a faculty position teaching the policy sciences to graduate students. Today at Colorado we are working through several new programs to train third- and fourth-generation policy sciences Ph.D.s and on that basis alone I am optimistic about the future. The good news is that the production of Ph.D.s and their placement in academia are easy to measure, and such data should continue

to provide us with one metric of challenges to sustainability. Of course, it is exactly trends in numbers that motivated my essay, first drafted 3 years ago.

Muth and Wallace both characterize my analysis as “pessimistic.” Presumably this characterization stems from the fact that I have suggested that business-as-usual is unlikely to sustain the policy sciences tradition, and that change is needed. An “optimistic” standpoint, such as Wallace presents, suggests that business-as-usual is sufficient to sustain the policy sciences tradition. I certainly hold out hope that Wallace will in the end be proved correct, but as is popularly said these days in the context of national security, hope is not a plan. I would feel more comfortable about the future of the policy sciences were we as a community to apply our ample intellectual tools to the shared challenge of sustainability. The purpose of such an exercise, of course, is not to predict the future of the policy sciences movement, but to expand our freedom of choice about what future we would like to make happen through insight generated by the exercise of raising questions about sustainability.

Among a wide range of creative and interesting options for the community to consider, Pelletier suggests capitalizing on the embedded policy scientist within a non-policy sciences academic department. This is a model worth evaluating as the vast majority of policy scientists in academia are embedded in exactly this manner. One question raised by such an option is, What evidence is there that these policy scientists will be able to train members of the next generation so that they in turn will be able to teach the policy sciences in a comprehensive way to succeeding generations? With respect to sustainability, the proof will be in the numbers.

I readily confess that I do not see how Wallace’s discussion of “intellectual traditions of the policy sciences, the history of published work in the policy sciences, and the ‘institutionalization’ of the policy sciences through various forums” provides any arguments in contrast to the six conditioning factors I discussed in my essay.¹ Instead, I see Wallace’s discussion as highly relevant and compatible. Specifically, he and I seem to be in violent agreement that (a) the policy sciences indeed have a well-developed and strong history, and (b) the policy sciences have already gone some way down the path of institutionalizing that I have recommended be continued with even greater vigor. In varying degrees each, Muth, Pelletier, and Wallace agree that institutionalization of the policy sciences makes sense. From this standpoint, there would seem to be few grounds for objections to fine tuning such institutionalization in ways that further foster the tradition’s sustainability.

Wallace suggests that even raising questions of sustainability brings up an additional concern: “My fear is that Pielke’s essay will be considered another work in the list of critics of the policy sciences.” Wallace does not say about whom he is concerned or what effects these unnamed people will have, but suffice it to say that I do not share this concern. After sharing earlier versions of this paper during the past 3 years I am pleased that it has served to initiate a dialogue among students about real concerns they have about the sustainability of the tradition that they are entering into (e.g., “but can I get a job?”), has engaged numerous colleagues in fruitful debate and discussion, and now has resulted in the three thoughtful responses. A few colleagues have, admittedly, not been so positive in their reactions, but no one to my knowledge has used the analysis in the way suggested by Wallace (and even if they did I do not see the possibility of harm to our community). By contrast, the act of raising concerns

about sustainability would seem to show support for the policy sciences tradition. My experiences suggest that we as a community can engage difficult and even uncomfortable issues in a constructive manner while maintaining a shared commitment to the policy sciences and its sustainability.

I note some strong differences of opinion between Wallace and Pelletier, in particular, on their interpretation of the conditioning factors shaping the policy sciences tradition in the broader academic context. Wallace simply dismisses these factors as “overstated” with regard to their potential effect on the policy sciences tradition, whereas Pelletier not only finds merit in them and resonance with his own experience, but expands upon them to identify other trends and conditions worth considering that may be relevant to the long term sustainability of the policy sciences tradition. At a minimum this suggests that within our community exists a diversity of experiences and perspectives on conditions necessary and sufficient for sustainability, which to me seems like a good justification for a continued discussion of sustainability.

Pelletier observes, quite correctly, that there are many trends in academia that reflect the partial incorporation of the policy sciences perspective which should provide substantial optimism that the policy sciences will find increasing acceptance and shared perspectives across a range of areas of inquiry. I agree with this interpretation, but whereas finding many areas of compatibility across the academic enterprise may well ensure that the elements of the policy sciences approach are here to stay, it does not guarantee the sustainability of the distinctive, integrated policy sciences tradition, which seeks to synthesize such partial perspectives into a comprehensive approach. Policy scientists may decide that the sum of partial approaches renders sustainability of the distinctive tradition unnecessary. My concern is that such a decision should be made explicitly, lest we discover one day that the partial approaches are all that remains.

Muth “dreads” the notion that the policy sciences might take on more of the characteristics of a formal academic “discipline.” I believe that we are in considerable agreement on this point, but simply have different images in mind about the characteristics of a “discipline.” Every one of Muth’s concrete recommendations for action seems to me not only useful, but also consistent with the policy sciences taking on more of the trappings of a conventional discipline. For example, when he argues for increasing the “impact” of the policy sciences (or perhaps increasing the promotion of such impacts), I would simply agree and note that making the case for “impact” is a fundamental characteristic of most disciplines with aspirations to societal relevance. Here we can learn from the experiences of other interdisciplinary academic movements with well identified central intellectual cores, and their relative successes and failures in establishing themselves as sustainable through a greater or lesser degree of “disciplinization.”

Not without irony, I would note that after Wallace completely dismisses my concerns he goes on to cite the experiences of three movements within academia that have overcome obstacles to sustainability through *exactly* the sort of institutionalization that I have recommended for the policy sciences. There is much experience to harvest from the cases that Wallace cites, as well as other experience, that can help us to shape the future of the policy sciences tradition in ways that might facilitate its sustainability.

Muth poses an excellent question when he asks, “Consider, for example, the matter of *outcomes*. Considered directly, do the policy sciences produce better policy?” If the policy sciences are to be more than another area of purely academic interest, then it is necessary to evaluate outcomes associated with teaching, learning, and applying the policy sciences. Some have effectively taken on the challenge of making the case for the practical significance of the policy sciences in the policy movement, e.g., various works by Ronald Brunner; however, making such a case cannot be done once and for all, but is a challenge that must be continuously addressed, and in his response Muth helps to address this challenge.

Pelletier goes too far when he suggests that I have argued that attention to the institutionalization of the policy sciences is “necessary (and sufficient) . . . to improve the base of intelligence for decision making and the further realization of human dignity.” My argument is neither so simplistic nor so naïve. I have made the case that attention to the institutionalization of the policy sciences tradition (or some other alternative action beyond business-as-usual) is necessary if that tradition is to sustain. That is all. I explicitly raise the question of “sustainability for what?” and am open to alternatives other than the steps I recommended that might foster sustainability.

In closing, to Muth’s argument that “no single discipline can address adequately the complexity of today’s or tomorrow’s policy problems,” I would simply respond that the distinctive tradition of the policy sciences represents the most developed (and most effective) effort that I am aware of to create such a discipline. The policy sciences tradition has come a long way since its development in the middle of the last century. Its future is now in our hands.

Note

1. In fact, in the original essay I explicitly write that I assume that the reader is familiar with the matters that Wallace identifies as missing in the analysis.